

The CFA resurrects two complementary but very different labor films this week, though only one turns out as formally and intellectually radical as its subject. **UNION MAIDS** (1976, 55 min, 16mm) by Jim Klein, Julia Reichart, and Miles Mogulescu is a welcome artifact from a pre-Ken Burns era of talking head documentary. The crudity of the editing can't diminish the immediacy of the well-researched archival footage of strikes and the state violence marshaled to put them down. The contemporary interviews with three New Deal-era labor organizers contribute to a solid ground-level view of American history, but the final product imparts an understanding on par with a high school textbook, emphasizing extraordinary life stories at the expense of complex institutional and ideological forces. (It's a telling example of the film's reticence that the Trade Union Unity League is broached, but without any reference to that group's CPUSA origins. It's also curious that the feminist filmmakers adopt the Alamanac Singers' "Union Maid" without engaging with the anthem's broad sexism.)

I appreciated Kyle 's short advance review of the Chicago Film Archive show at But, as someone who was around when the film Union Maids was made and knew the filmmakers, and discussed their decisions with them while they were shooting and editing the film, I have a slightly different perspective on some key matters that Kyle raises. So I offer them here in the spirit of adding to the discussion.

As Kyle points out, the film emphasizes the heroic efforts of three women union organizers as individuals while slighting the complex institutional forces, including relation to the Communist Party. It's not as if the filmmakers were unaware of those matters. The three women's stories, along with other histories were originally collected by Staughton and Alice Lynd and appeared in the book *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working Class Organizers* (1973). Kyle is correct that the

emphasis is on the heroism of three exemplary activist women, but it's also the case that that armature is useful for introducing a lost history of labor activism.

There were several considerations for the filmmakers here, and thinking about them might help contemporary media folks think about some decisions in doing this kind of historical film.

One is simply the format and necessities of very low budget filmmaking. This was long before the long-form or serial documentary, the issue based feature length theatrical documentary, and cable TV highlighting of histories. The 55 min length of the film marked it, at the time, as at best fitting into a standard PBS slot.

The idea of grass roots oral histories was itself still a new idea. Chicago's own Studs Terkel had just started his series of books; Staughton Lynd also in Chicago at the time was a well known, well established PhD historian who had been fired from Yale for going to North Vietnam on a peace mission in the mid-60s. In that sense, the fuller more complex story of 30s labor activism is available in the Lynd book (as well as other work on labor history).

Union Maids served several different agendas. To the dominant stream of the Second Wave women's movement it challenged the young, white, and middle class bias with these older working class women who talk directly of blue collar issues. To the New Left activists who were often ignorant of or dismissive of an earlier radical movement, and whose own grounding was in anti-war, black nationalist, and the student movement, it introduced committed grassroots labor organizing. To the separatist and nationalist parts of the Black, Brown, Native American, and Asian movements it offered

people uniting across race lines. For the labor movement, it was an important reminder of the importance of women in the labor movement and a critique of sexism within the union hierarchy. It was a workhorse film, often being the only thing about working class women that would be presented early Women's Studies courses.

It's worth remembering, in our privatized personal streaming days, that *Union Maids* was almost always screened as a film, and that meant gathering people together and then having a discussion afterwards. Sometimes this was a class, sometimes it was an activist meeting, sometimes it was part of an organizing drive. So the film really wasn't meant to stand alone, but to be a discussion provoking film.

It's also worth remembering that even as late as the mid-1970s the deep disconnect with 1930s left politics was a huge loss to all activism. History was lost, and the film was an attempt to open up that story which was actively repressed by the Cold War and McCarthyism. Kyle faults the film for not detailing the connections with the US Communist Party, but only one of the three interviewed women was willing to be identified as having a CPUSA past, another didn't want to be in the film if this connection was going to be openly made, and the third was actually using a false name in the film, still fearing retaliation and job loss if her real past would be revealed. (She was still working, well past retirement age, because she had lied about her age—subtracting 10 years—in order to get a job she really needed to support herself after a divorce.) Folks need to be aware that so many people had lost their jobs, their futures, under the repression and the blacklist, that most of a generation felt they had to hide their actual past even from their own children. In addition, given the peculiar twists and turns of the CPUSA, many were disillusioned or angry with that

institution but did not want to then join the right wing hysteria decrying “socialists” and “communists.” (And are we really past that point when Barack Obama is casually labeled a socialist by Fox news commentators?)

I think it might be more useful to think of *Union Maids* as being an introduction to or commercial for reading the Lynds’ book and learning more about the 30s and labor organizing. After all, only a few colleges and universities offer courses in labor and working class history, even today. Those that do usually connect it with a labor education program that offer certificate training for people to become shop stewards and occupy other roles within established unions.

Union Maids also inspired other interview based history films such as Connie Field’s *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) about women entering the industrial workforce in World War 2. And, significantly, in 1983 the makers of *Union Maids*, Julia Reichert and Jim Klein produced *Seeing Red*, which interviews people who were in the CPUSA from the 1930s on.

JoAnn Elam's **EVERYDAY PEOPLE** (1979-90, 22 min, Video Projection) provokes no such qualms. Elam positions the USPS letter carrier as a literal street-level organizer of shattered working-class Chicago communities and argues her thesis with a singular assemblage of testimonials, workplace protocol, neighborhood walking tours, and startling flashes of color. Over the course of the film's extended production, Elam quit her job as a Logan Square letter carrier, but **EVERYDAY PEOPLE** betrays no bitterness: it's a film dedicated to helping people make sense

of their economic positions and recognize the validity of their own lives. EVERYDAY PEOPLE was never finished, but the expanse of its ideas and ambitions resists recognized forms anyway. CFA will be screening the longest extant version, which survives on a VHS tape that combines 16mm, Super 8, Hi-8, and 3/4" video footage. Also screening is Jessica Bardsley's 2012 video LIE BACK AND ENJOY IT: A FILM ABOUT JOANN ELAM. **KAW**